

THE TEXAS ORATOR



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A Conversation with Colton and Mehraz

shoumik dabir

Disclaimer: I have attended two campaign meetings for the Colton-Mehraz campaign and you may have seen me tabling for them on Speedway a couple of times. I got involved in the campaign toward its tail end but haven't been especially proactive—until now. This interview is meant to shed some light on who the candidates are, what they stand for, and their ideas for making UT a better place.

Personally speaking, I have seen the campaign up close and found a group of dedicated, hardworking individuals who are just as passionate about engaging with the student population as they are about their vision for UT. Colton and Mehraz will undoubtedly make a great team to lead Student Government and get started on a number of things that can improve our experience as Longhorns. To find out more about their platform, visit coltonmehraz18.com!

So, to start off, why are you running?

Colton Becker: To pad our resumes. Duh.

Mehraz Rahman: Colton, stop. We are running because we believe we make a great team. We're from very different groups on campus, and even then, we know we can't represent all the voices on campus. But through this campaign, we are trying our best to bring together all the various groups on campus and create a



Colton Becker: I think Mehrnaz and I both struggled to find our footing a bit when we came to UT as freshmen. I mean I didn't know anybody — I came from this small town called Alvin. So, for many like myself, transitioning to college was a big struggle. It took up much of my time as a freshman and I had to recoup those losses in my sophomore year. And during this time I got more involved on campus and found my way to Student Government. I applied to the executive board for the campaign last year and didn't think I had a shot at all because I had never been involved before, but I rolled the dice and got it. After that I developed a passion for working on things that had impacted me on campus and I know Mehrnaz felt the same.

Mehraz Rahman: For me, a part of it had to do with the fact that I came to the campus during election season and thought that Student Government was something I might want to get involved in. I was just really confused by these pre-law students pretending to be politicians in their little suits and stuff taking it so seriously—you know what I mean? It was just Student Government! But then I started to realize that Student Government was a real platform for advocacy because it is the official voice of the student body. And as of right now, it is not a super representative voice of the student body, but it's definitely something we're going to work on if we get elected. The president and vice president are also a really important link between the student body and the administration. So that's why I'm running: I saw a platform for advocacy through the president and vice president positions and we feel that we can take this advocacy to the next level.

If you had to summarize your platform in one or two words, what would it be and why?

Colton Becker: Quality of life. That's three words, is that okay? So when you think realistically about what SG is the most capable of doing, it's to use its powers to address service barriers that prevent student success. If you look through the history of the university, students have always been the drivers of change from day one. The DKR stadium, for example, was completely a student-led initiative.

Wait a second, you're telling me that the gigantic hunk of concrete on San Jacinto Avenue was the result of student efforts?

Colton Becker: Yep, so was the SAC. This student body is a living, breathing organism—I'm a science student so I'll put it in those terms. The administrators are here to listen, to hear us and figure out what they can do to support us and ensure that our time here is maximized and successful. The president and vice president aren't the only important positions on campus, there are countless other students who do such work every day. It's a microcosm of society and the unique thing about positions like president and VP is that you can bring the big ideas that a number of students want implemented and put them into play.

Mehraz Rahman: Also, I think the whole “quality of life” aspect is evident in pretty much every platform point we have. We have a few major points: interpersonal violence prevention — which is unique to our ticket — health and wellness both physically and mentally, and student empowerment, which Colton touched on. We want to ensure that students are empowered to take on their own initiatives and that SG co-opts the ideas brought forward by students.

Colton Becker: That one’s really important because being involved in student advocacy on campus gives you so many opportunities in terms of personal and professional development. Mehraz and I have a problem with the fact that a lot of the student power is vested in a few certain positions on campus, including the student body president and vice president. I was on the exec board last year and took part in one meeting after another—but that stuff isn’t what gets me going anymore. I’m more passionate about providing meaningful opportunities for engagement for other students.

Mehraz Rahman: A lot of how we built our platform was based on conversations we had with different student voices across campus. We wanted to ensure that students who traditionally do not have that opportunity to be heard, who are disadvantaged, or are simply in a position where they do not have the same privileges as us are heard.

What specifically are you referring to?

Mehraz Rahman: Making sure that marginalized voices are heard! Things like having inclusivity training in registered student organizations can go a long way. All organizations are required to go through some kind of orientation, but inclusivity training is not a part of it. We have a couple of presentation slides stressing that UT cares about diversity but there’s not much else to it. Also, having more reflection spaces on campus for religious purposes: I’m a Muslim student who has to pray five times a day but the only reflection spaces where I can freely do so are in the PCL and the Union and it’s just really inconvenient. We want more of such spaces — not just for Muslim students who have to pray but also students of all faiths who can use it for meditation or just a quiet place.

Colton Becker: I’d also like to mention a quick personal example from my end. Financial aid was what allowed me to come to UT and when I have to deal with a financial aid office that historically fails to be held accountable by students, it’s just frustrating. Back in the fall, they told me they that I owed them \$800 and it was a complete mistake on their part. But they waited one week to tell me that and as a result, I had to register for classes late. It was a nerve-racking experience and the anxiety I faced is something I’ll remember. Financial aid has impacted the quality of life at UT, which is why a “Financial Bill of Rights” that protects the

interests of the student is a major platform point of ours. So this is why I get fired up about certain things and where a lot of our passion comes from: personal experiences that students have had.

What has been the most memorable part of this campaign so far?

Colton Becker: Discovering Teji's. Mehraz told me about it last year.

Discovering Teji's this late is truly preposterous, Colton. But like you both mentioned earlier, you have been involved with Student Government in the past. If you could change one thing about it, what would it be and why?

Colton Becker: Eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic waste would be a good place to start.

Mehraz Rahman: As the director of the Diversity and Inclusion Agency, one of the things that is really, really tough is buying things for your organization. You have to fill out paperwork weeks in advance and that's understandable to a certain extent, but too often it just seems excessive. There's a lot of red tape that you have to go through, especially if you have great ideas about large scale events. It just makes everything harder.

Colton Becker: When I was on the exec board last year, there was a lot of talk about diversity inclusion in SG. And such conversations reverberated well beyond UT on the national level. But the truth is, despite all these conversations within SG, we do not do well at all in terms of communicating with the general student population. If students want to know what SG is doing, they have to go to SG. This year I'm considered a SG insider and even I don't know what's happening in SG! Communication, and getting everybody on board, is something SG can do better. I mean, how hard is it to send a campus-wide email once or twice a semester? When I was Communications Director, we had a lot of record highs for engagement because we used creative methods to meet the student body where they were at. Some students are not going to care about SG regardless, and that's completely fine. But we need to make that effort to reach out and give people the opportunity to get involved in Student Government. And I don't just mean create new positions for their sake. We want to have students meaningfully involved, which I think can make the organization much more effective.

Okay, this is the last question. What should the voters look for when examining different campaigns?

What are the one or two things you want us to consider above all else?

Mehraz Rahman: Feasibility is one thing that we have rooted our platform in, and it's central to our campaign. Colton has worked extensively with the administration in the past and has a good idea of what is

possible and what is not.

So you want us to consider the different platforms and attempt to discern what is feasible and what is not?

Colton Becker: Yep. But to me, it's still a tough call. On one hand, I want people to think about what their values are and vote according to that. The only thing I would say not to vote on is artificial judgments and assumptions that serve to divide our campus. Instead, look at where your values lie and vote accordingly. I'm not going to sit here and dictate what everyone should care about, but I will say that people should care. And I think taking that step to just care is the most important one.

Thank you so much taking the time to have this conversation. I really appreciate it and good luck on election day!

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Shoumik Dabir is a board member of *The Texas Orator* and a contributing writer on international affairs, foreign policy, and other important things. He likes long walks on the beach, a good book before bed, a strong cappuccino, and traveling the world. He is also single.

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